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AUTHOR Olson, Gayle K.; Bredemus, Claudia T.
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ABSTRACT

The Empowering Learners Project, a collaborative effort of five United Way agencies in the St. Paul (Minnesota) area, produced this manual to outline some strategies for assisting English-as-a-Second-Language learners in becoming effective learners and critical thinkers. Ideas in the manual came from project agencies and research in critical thinking and language learning. An introductory section offers some background information about the project. The second section explains methods used in two of the five participating programs to help students think about literacy and its meaning to them. The third section briefly discusses critical thinking as an active process to be used both in and out of the classroom. Subsequent sections look at the following topics: (1) specific strategies for teaching critical thinking, including low-level and higher-level skills, real-life problem-solving, application to grammar, and use of pictures; (2) the classroom environment, including paired and small group learning and workplace simulation; (3) learner empowerment through the teaching of clarification strategies, classroom management and self-assessment; (4) use of critical thinking strategies in bilingual/bicultural curricula; and (5) encouraging students to make use of community resources to test and strengthen newly-acquired language skills. A 16-item bibliography and a brief list of student texts are appended. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (MSE)

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EMPOWERING LEARNERS

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CRITICAL THINKING IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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By

GAYLE K. OLSON, instructor
International Institute of Minnesota
and
CLAUDIA T. BREDEMUS, curriculum specialist
Technology for Literacy Center
Community Education, St. Paul Public Schools

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Critical Thinking in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language

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Empowering Learners Project
United Way of the St. Paul Area
166 E. 4th St.
St. Paul, MN 55101-1448

Introduction

The essence of critical thinking skills is the willingness to challenge old assumptions and examine alternatives. This includes, but is not limited to, assumptions about how we learn. Lifelong learning and the successful participation in society require critical thinking skills daily, ranging from such tasks as problem solving on the job to evaluating all the information produced by mass media.

For those adults learning English as a second language (ESL) and trying to mesh with American society, the need to be good at learning is particularly important. With multiple demands on their lives, they need to maximize the time they devote to learning English and integrate language learning practices into their daily lives. This requires critical thinking. Thus, the Empowering Learners Project (ELP) in St. Paul, Minnesota, has produced this manual to outline some strategies for assisting English-as-a-second-language learners with the task of becoming effective learners and critical thinkers. Ideas in this manual came from agencies in the project as well as research in the fields of critical thinking and language learning.

The Empowering Learners Project is a collaboration of five St. Paul United Way agencies, the Technology for Literacy Center, and the United Way of the St. Paul Area. One of the goals of the project was to examine critical thinking skills in relation to the needs of the adults who come to the agencies for instruction in basic skills and ESL. The five agencies are:

CLUES (Chicanos Latinos Unidos en Servicios) - a multi-service agency that primarily serves Hispanics

Guadalupe Area Project - an alternative high school with an adult ESL program

International Institute of Minnesota - an agency that provides services related to international education as well as ESL instruction to immigrants

Labor Resource and Studies Center - an agency that serves dislocated workers

Lao Family Community of Minnesota - a multi-service agency that primarily serves Laotian and Hmong refugees.

The Technology for Literacy Center is a program of the Community Education Department, St. Paul Public Schools. We wish to give special thanks to the UPS Foundation and the United Way of America for funding this project.

Critical Thinking About Literacy

At least two of the agencies that are part of ELP – Lao Family Community and CLUES – engage their clients in thinking critically about literacy, sometimes even before classes begin. Also, they both encourage their clients to reflect on literacy as an intergenerational concern. For both agencies, a key to success with this strategy is bilingual staff members who can facilitate discussions about literacy in their clients' own language.

Staff members of Lao Family Community hold an orientation workshop for all students prior to each new cycle, or quarter. At the workshop, students who have registered for classes are encouraged to evaluate their own personal situation and examine priorities in their lives. Students are urged to think critically about the demands in their lives and their readiness to commit themselves to regular attendance in classes. Those who conclude they can make the commitment are engaged in a goal setting process. Goals are intentionally concrete and oriented to specific outcomes such as visiting a child's school X number of times, going to X number of job interviews, etc.

A second message delivered at this workshop is that the adults attending classes will be expected to be a part of their children's education. Workshop attendees get a taste of Lao Family's classroom approach by engaging in a problem solving activity, often one related to parenting. For this activity, they are divided into small groups and given a topic of concern in the St. Paul Southeast Asian community, e.g., the increase in youth gangs. Each small group identifies several issues related to the topic and proposes at least three solutions. Thus, before beginning classes, clients of Lao Family Community are introduced to the program's theme of parent/child involvement and the process of problem-solving. Lao Family Community conducts these workshops four times a year with the goals of empowering their students as parents, setting a tone for critical thinking, and improving attendance.

Similarly, CLUES focuses on the intergenerational effects of adult learning. As an organization serving many immigrants with families, CLUES places its emphasis on impacting the second generation. It does this by assisting its adult clients, who have a wide range of education and ability, with setting realistic goals that will help them learn English in the context of stabilizing their family lives. CLUES clients are also urged to model and instill in their children the value of learning. Thus, clients are guided to a process view of lifelong learning, in which success is measured in personal terms, not by an external standard. This approach of encouraging clients to think critically about literacy provides an important framework for adult learners, as they engage in the difficult tasks of language learning and supporting families.

Critical Thinking: An Active Process

Four of the five agencies involved in the Empowering Learners Project work exclusively with ESL learners who come equipped with a wide range of critical thinking skills. Some learners possess highly developed critical thinking skills which they can apply to all areas of their lives, including language learning. Others appear to use critical thinking in their own language, but often have discomfort applying these skills in a classroom setting because of unfamiliarity with Western styles of teaching. These tend to be learners who have never been in a classroom setting at all or are accustomed to a teacher-centered classroom in which the teacher or tutor is expected to fill the students with knowledge, and the students are passive. Their perception of the teacher as an authority may hinder their active involvement in the classroom.

Learners less inclined to use critical thinking skills need help in seeing what they can do for themselves. They may need to be shown how they can assess their own needs and take control of their own learning so that language learning doesn't end as soon as they step outside the classroom. Reflection on the learning process will help these students become more self-aware and more aware of the strategies that are most suitable to their particular learning style. The focus of a language course for these students should be not only on what to learn but also on how to learn. An awareness of one's own learning is called metacognition.

By integrating metacognitive strategies into the ESL classroom, students can become more effective language learners and begin to take responsibility for their own learning. It is also hoped that these students will become capable of applying these skills to other subjects and to other areas of their lives, if they are not already doing so.

Strategies for Teaching Critical Thinking

Low level skills

> *I make my own flashcards of idioms, and on my way to school on the bus I look at them and try to guess the meanings.*
>
> A.K., Russia

Critical thinking and the empowerment of learners is more likely to happen if the teacher or tutor is a facilitator of learning, guiding students through a process of discovery and drawing conclusions. Lupe Serrano, Director of Community Affairs at CLUES, believes that teaching is an interactive process, not a one-way street. As such, those in a teaching role need to examine their own attitudes about learning and their role in facilitating it. To understand facilitative teaching, an analogy to a science laboratory is helpful. In the laboratory, students engage in an experiment after which they review their data and draw conclusions. The same kind of experiment can be set up in a language classroom in order to guide students toward discovering which strategies are most helpful to them in language learning and which are not. Students can be called upon to reflect on the processes involved in language learning and to find out what works for them.

Some very helpful books have been written to guide teachers in this endeavor. One such book is Learning to Learn Language which is organized around Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills. It begins with classroom activities for the lowest level skills such as observation, memory, and association and proceeds on up to higher level thinking skills such as reasoning and judgment.

An example of a lower level thinking task would be how to learn vocabulary. Students are given lists of words and a set amount of time in which to learn them. The lists are organized in different ways. One list would be a random group of words with no relationship to each other. Another list might be organized in some way, for example a list of opposites. A third list would be organized around a theme, such as a list of body parts. After the students attempt to memorize each list, the teacher asks them to reflect on which lists were easiest to recall and which lists were hardest and why. The students could do this task in small groups or pairs. Most likely, the students will discover for themselves that lists with some associations among the words were far

easier to recall than the randomly grouped words. The teacher would then elicit responses as to what they had learned about effective ways of learning vocabulary.

Another language learning game, used by some teachers at the International Institute of Minnesota, is to give each student in the class a picture of an object. The student's task is to define the object to the other members of the class, without naming it. The other students must guess what the object is. Students will choose many different ways to define an object. Some students will offer a physical description of size, shape, or color. Other students will describe what the object is used for or where it is found. Still others might come up with synonyms. When the game is over, students are asked to think about which objects were easiest to guess, and which were hardest. They can talk about which kinds of descriptions were more effective at conveying meaning and why. The teacher engages students in a discussion on what they learned about using prior knowledge to define or describe specific vocabulary words. According to Sadler and Whimbey (1985), "too often students are not challenged to figure out how to use what they already know. Thus they fail to transfer learning to new situations."

Effective language learners have learned how to turn any native speaker into a teacher by using definition and description to elicit from the native speaker the vocabulary words that the learner doesn't know. By engaging in a discussion about which definitions were more effective than others, the students are reflecting on the subject of what makes communication more effective. They are given practice in the specific skill area as well as an awareness of the language learning process.

Higher level skills

> *What we try to do is to make the students' vocabulary and grammar operational so that it isn't just locked in their heads. The class is really alive. The students learn from the teacher and from each other.*
>
> Eve Johnson, Instructor at International Institute

The above activities have focused on the lower level cognitive skills of knowledge and recall. On a little higher cognitive level, that of comprehension, an activity that is used in some classes at the International Institute, is to read aloud a short story to the students. Then, each student is given time to write the same story in his or her own words. In small groups, the students read their stories to each other. The teacher gives them a written copy of the original story. The students

compare their stories with the original story. They can see the different ways that each student paraphrased or restated the original story and talk about which ones are closest to the original in conveying meaning and why.

There is a variation on this same theme which is also used by some teachers at the International Institute. Some of the teachers will choose a text that the student has written, and they will rewrite it in correct English while being careful not to alter the basic meaning. The students can then compare the two texts as to changes that have been made not only in grammar and vocabulary but also in style and organization. In higher level classes the students can be asked to analyze the qualities of a well-written text.

An excellent resource for higher level critical thinking activities such as reasoning, judgment, and creativity is the Non-Stop Discussion Workbook. Beth Upton, a teacher at International Institute, has successfully used one activity in her classroom in which the students produce a budget for an imaginary country. The students work together in small groups and agree upon how to allocate funds. They negotiate with one another, come to a consensus and defend their choices. Ms. Upton has found this discussion activity far more engaging and meaningful when students are expected to actually create an end-product such as a budget. Similarly, an activity for students at a lower level might be planning a household budget.

Another stimulating activity that Ms. Upton has used with success is one in which students in small groups try to agree upon which people they would like to save from a sinking ship. Students are given descriptions of the people on the ship, e.g., a homosexual doctor or an alcoholic sea captain. This becomes an exercise in values clarification for the students as they reflect on their choices and analyze why they feel as they do. They often discover their own unconscious biases and preconceived notions about different groups of people. These biases are often challenged by other students.

Real-life problem solving

Learner-centered problem solving is an activity used by several agencies not only as a way of assisting students with their daily lives, but also as the content for language learning. Peg Holper, a teacher with Lao Family Community, frequently turns students' everyday problems into an experience meant to empower students and encourage critical thinking. When a student brings a problem to her and asks for advice, she reverses the process and asks the class what they think.

One example of this occurred when a student came to class with a problem regarding public housing. Ms. Holper divided the class into small groups and asked them to come up with solutions to the student's problem. She said that because the students knew so much more about

public housing than she did, a workable solution was found by the students. Similarly, Ms. Holper often uses events like parent-teacher conferences as the basis for problem solving and language learning. For volunteer tutors, requests for assistance from students with problems can often be overwhelming, and using the approach described above can reduce that demand and empower learners.

Strategies for teaching grammar

> *I talk to myself in English while I'm cooking or while I'm cleaning the house. "I'm putting the Crisco in the pan. I'm breaking the eggs."*
>
> S. K., South Korea

The application of critical thinking skills to the teaching of grammar has proved to be very effective. At the International Institute, at least at the lower levels, teacher talk about grammar rules is kept to a minimum. The students instead are presented with many examples of a particular grammar point, and are expected to work out the rules for themselves. This involves the higher level critical thinking skills of analysis and deduction. One series of textbooks which lends itself to this method is Grammar in Action I, II, and III. Each lesson is organized around an illustration carefully drawn to elicit a specific grammar point. Several examples of the grammar point to be learned accompany the picture. The students can usually figure out grammar rules and any new vocabulary from the examples and the context provided by the pictures, thus freeing them from dependency on the teacher. Rules that the students have worked out for themselves are usually easier for students to remember than rules that are fed to them by a teacher. Students can be asked to try to state the rules in their own words.

Another effective method for getting students to reflect on grammar patterns is to give them a list of sentences, some of which are correct and some of which contain errors. Working in pairs or small groups, students analyze the sentences to find the errors. This can be especially helpful when the sentences contain real errors drawn from the students' work. (The teacher might want to alter the content of the sentences somewhat to spare students any possible embarrassment.) Any one student might not be able to find and correct all the errors, but by working first in small groups and then as a class, they usually can analyze the sentences and generate correct sentences with minimal teacher input. This again helps them become more aware of the structure or rules of the language and helps build confidence in their own abilities to monitor errors and to self correct when necessary.

In addition, students should be asked to assess which mistakes are more serious than others, i.e., which ones get in the way of meaning and which don't. In this way students are better equipped to focus their energies on those grammar points which are obstacles to meaningful communication. This kind of exercise is especially helpful for the kind of non-reflective language learners who are good at mimicry and at picking up the language from their surroundings. They often continue to make the same mistakes for years because they are not conscious of making them.

Beth Upton uses other effective methods of feedback on grammar mistakes in her higher level classes. The students are all expected to use a colored pencil to circle or mark their mistakes in written exercises and check-up tests. This enables the students to keep track of their error patterns. In reviewing homework and tests, one student may find a tendency to make mistakes in the use of articles. Another student might tend to make mistakes with gerunds and infinitives. The student plays an active role in evaluating his or her strengths and weaknesses and has a visual record of them. The teacher then consults with each student to make sure he or she knows where to go for extra help in the areas where it is needed.

At the higher levels, students are expected to take more initiative in evaluating problem areas and in assessing what to do to strengthen themselves in these areas. Ms. Upton uses a similar technique in the classroom for error correction. When sentences on the board are being corrected, she uses different colored chalk to record the students' corrections. She withholds comments until the students have had time to come to a decision about the correct form. This gives the students practice in decision-making and it empowers them. They are empowered when they discover how much they can do for themselves without the help of the teacher.

One very important aspect of learning grammar is that of learning how to use patterns to generate new language. The study of grammar is in part the study of language patterns. In Beth Upton's classes, students learn to use these grammar patterns to create original poetry. Here's an example of a poem created by students studying comparatives:

I'd like more tolerance and less crime,
more freedom and less pollution,
more snow and less rain.
I'd like more tolerance and less help,
more peace and less sorrow,
more money and less greed.
I'd like more security and less fighting,
more sunshine and less rain,

more nature and less pollution.
I'd like more love and less quarrelling;
I'd like more solutions and fewer problems.

Using pictures

My husband and I bought a close-captioned box for the TV to help us learn English.

Y. H., Taiwan

Just as pictures or illustrations are used extensively for the teaching of grammar, they can also be used to teach both speaking and writing, especially for students at a lower level. The use of picture sequences and cartoons is another way to actively engage the learner in creating stories and dialogues around the pictures. It is also a way of demonstrating to students how to use what they already know. When they are called upon to create a story as a small-group effort, they are often surprised at how well they can describe what is going on in a cartoon series or a picture sequence. It's a way of helping students to activate their passive knowledge of the language. There are many sources of good picture sequences available now. Some of the better ones are:

Comics and Conversation
Lexicarry
Action English Pictures
Picture Stories for Beginning Composition
Picture Stories
Composition Through Pictures
Picture It

Joua Moua, a teacher at Lao Family Community, uses pictures as part of a bilingual lesson. She holds up a picture and discusses it in English and Hmong. After giving students time to process their thoughts about the picture in English, Ms. Moua then has students write about the picture.

Classroom environment

Small groups and learning

> *I feel more comfortable in pairwork discussion rather than just listening or just looking at the blackboard. We can talk about some trivial things in pairwork discussion. I think it's very good for making friends in class, for making new friends in new situations.*
>
> S. K., South Korea

It is recommended that most all of the above activities be done in pairs or small groups. Small group work, which is used extensively by most of the agencies in the Empowering Learners Project, is an extremely valuable tool for promoting critical thinking. Aside from the obvious benefits of maximizing the amount of time each student spends using English in the classroom, it also relaxes students and reduces their fear of speaking and expressing opinions in class. The student who is afraid of speaking up in front of the whole class usually has no problem speaking up in a small group. According to Nummela and Rosengren (1986), reducing anxiety in the classroom is a very desirable goal. When threatened, the more primitive brain is activated. The primitive brain deals with emotions and reflexive behavior.

> Old brain-programmed behaviors and responses allow little room for reflection, insight, foresight, and other more complex learning associated with the neocortex...
>
> (Nummela and Rosengren, 1986)

Students are more relaxed in small groups or pairs, and are thus usually far more willing to actively participate in discussions. According to Robert J. Sternberg (1987):

> Psychologists have recently come to realize the great extent to which thought emerges as a social process, and is internalized only after it has been socially expressed...
> Because collective effort is so important in our daily lives and because we now realize that at least a substantial portion of our ability to think originates outside ourselves, we must view class discussion as more than just a peripheral part of a thinking-skills program. Discussion is essential.

According to Sadler and Whimbey (1985),

> Communication is at the heart of the process by which intelligence (and learning, which is a primary form of intelligence) develops... a practical application of the importance of communication to learning to think is to provide opportunities for students to articulate their thinking and to receive a great deal of feedback.

Many teachers and tutors in the Empowering Learners Project feel the best way to maximize the students' opportunities to practice their English and receive feedback from fellow students is through the use of pairs and small groups. Peg Holper has found that it is very difficult to engage a whole class in critical thinking or problem solving. Usually the same few students respond when she addresses questions to the whole group. However, problem solving in small groups engages everyone and is much more successful, especially if students have a task of proposing solutions to a problem.

As could be expected, the use of pairs and small groups results at times in a very noisy classroom. However, this noise is really a sign that the students are actively engaged in their learning. They are expressing ideas, raising questions, and receiving feedback. At times, this kind of classroom can be unsettling for students who are unfamiliar with these methods and who are used to a more passive approach to learning. A discussion of why pairs, small groups, and peer teaching are used so frequently in the classroom can be very beneficial. Students again can be challenged to come up with their own reasons for why they think such methods are used. Usually the more students understand about why they are doing what they are doing, the more satisfied they will be with their class and the more enthusiastically they will participate.

Modeling the workplace

Another potential benefit of the use of pairs and small groups in working with adults is that of helping to prepare students for the workplace. A one-year study by the Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills identified five competencies that must be mastered in order to have "workplace knowhow." One of these competencies is in the area of interpersonal skills. According to this study, working on teams, teaching others, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds are among the skills that students will need to acquire in order to function well in the workplace.

Increasingly, workers are being expected to work on teams in the workplace. This is a new experience for some ESL students and often meets with resistance in the classroom. However, working in pairs and small groups forces them to work, cooperate, and negotiate with one another. It also gives them the opportunity to teach one another, which is probably one of the most effective ways of increasing students' awareness of the learning process and of reinforcing and activating what one already knows. According to Robert J. Sternberg (1987):

> It has often been said that there is no better way to learn than to teach. If this is so, then we must let students teach themselves to a large extent. We need to serve not strictly as teachers, but as facilitators...

Learner Empowerment with Clarification Strategies

Establishing an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable and unintimidated produces meaningful communication. It is also necessary to show students how they can take control of the communication process. This can be done by teaching clarification strategies and how to ask questions. At the International Institute, a lot of time is devoted to the skill of asking questions. This can convey to the students that they are in charge of their own learning and that the teacher is there as more of a facilitator to help guide them through this learning process. Clarification strategies also give students a sense of power or control of a situation. Common expressions the students learn to use with great frequency are:

"Could you please repeat that?"
"I'm sorry. I didn't catch that."
"Would you spell that please?"
"Could you tell me how to...?"
"Could you show me how to...?"
"Is this correct?"
"I'm sorry. I don't know."
"I'm sorry. I don't know how to..."
"What does that mean?"

The use of such questions and statements by students empowers them and allows them to assert some control over a given situation. An exercise used at the lower levels to elicit clarification strategies is to give a series of instructions to the students. The students are then expected to perform some task, possibly with materials the teacher or tutor has provided. The teacher deliberately includes words in the instructions which the students don't know. She doesn't offer any explanation. It is then necessary for students to use clarification strategies in order to accomplish the task. An example of this would be to give each student an index card, an envelope, and a paper clip. Then the teacher gives the following instructions:

1) "Write my address on the front of the card."
Possible student responses:
"I'm sorry. I don't know your address."
"Could you please tell me your address?"

2) "Attach the card to the envelope."

Possible student responses:

"What does 'attach' mean?"

"Is this correct?"

Another activity that requires the use of clarification strategies is to give a dictation rather rapidly. The dictation should include words that the teacher knows are unfamiliar to most of the students. The teacher doesn't repeat unless the students ask her to. The teacher is also willing to spell unfamiliar words if the students ask her to. The students need to practice the clarification strategies in order to complete the task. The teacher needs to be encouraging and needs to communicate to the students that the point of the dictation is not that they know how to spell every word but that they know how to ask for what they need. This again empowers students and reduces their fear. The students soon learn that they are not going to be punished or shamed for what they do not know but rather that they are going to be enthusiastically praised for attempting to ask for what they need.

More Empowering Practices

Classroom management

Many other strategies are used by agencies for empowering learners. In some classrooms at International Institute, students are expected to take over some of the responsibilities for managing the classroom. Sometimes a classroom manager is appointed to carry out certain tasks or assign them to others. Such tasks could include taking attendance, checking off homework assignments, or deciding on the makeup of pairs or small groups. Some teachers involve students in establishing an agenda for the day.

Beth Upton also expects the students to become involved in managing the interaction among students. Students usually look to the teacher to be the disciplinarian when students are not listening, talking out of turn, or being disruptive. Ms. Upton gives the students permission to give each other feedback on behaviors they find difficult to deal with. This of course is a very new experience for many students who come from countries where the teacher is the unquestioned authority. Ms. Upton feels it is beneficial for the teacher to leave the class periodically and turn the class over to the students for short periods of time. Again the students feel empowered when they can take charge of the class and complete tasks on their own.

The teachers also ask for feedback on the content of the class. This not only helps the teacher discover the most effective teaching methods but also gives the students an opportunity to negotiate the content of the course, particularly at the higher levels. Students have different learning styles and thus will find some teaching strategies more helpful than others. They should be given the opportunity to have some input into the content of the course. The result will be greater participation and enthusiasm on the part of students.

At Lao Family Community, each class has at least one representative. The representatives meet regularly with Geoffery Blanton, Education Coordinator, to discuss any issues regarding classes, materials, etc. One of the goals of this process is to develop leadership among students. Another is to encourage students to reflect critically on their learning experience.

Self-assessment

Most of the agencies include self-assessment as part of a student's learning experience. A common practice at the International Institute is that of individual student-teacher conferences towards the beginning of each session. In these conferences the students are asked to evaluate their

own strengths and weaknesses and to assess their own goals. Beth Upton sometimes involves her students in actually writing and signing a contract in which they agree upon some specific goals and how to reach them. This process requires the students to reflect on their own needs and to plan a course of action to achieve their goals.

To cultivate his students' ability to self-assess and to measure progress, Tou Sue Lee expects his students to keep journals. He encourages them to continue keeping a journal even after they have finished their English classes. He finds it to be a very valuable way to measure one's progress. Mr. Lee shares with his students his own experiences with journal writing. He still enjoys reading journal entries written years ago in a refugee camp. When he compares these entries with his current level of English, he can see the tremendous progress he has made in his English.

At CLUES, assessment is also learner-centered. Students participate in setting their own goals, thus determining what they are to learn. The students take part in their own evaluation based on these goals. The students are provided with examples of questions they can ask themselves in order to measure their own progress.

One of the biggest problems in assessing one's needs and goals in learning English is identifying those needs. Often students are not aware of their weaknesses and strengths. Some teachers at the International Institute have found that videotaping student interactions is an effective technique for increasing self- awareness. Various kinds of student interactions have been tried, but those that are spontaneous and unrehearsed appear to be the most useful in providing students with feedback.

Julie Rasmussen , a teacher at the International Institute, has videotaped students going through a job interview with an outside person whom they have never met. The students are instructed to dress as if for a real job interview and meet with the interviewer in a separate room. Later, after each student has completed the interview, the teacher and the student watch the interview together. Ms. Rasmussen stops the tape periodically to ask the student to evaluate his own performance. The teacher can ask such questions as:

"Can you understand your own English?"
"Did you understand the interviewer's question?"
"How did that sound to you?"
"How could you improve your answer?"
"What do you think the interviewer meant there?"

Ms. Rasmussen tries to let the student take the lead in this process of evaluation. She has also had equal success in letting just the students involved in each videotaped activity assess their own performance without the presence of the teacher. She has found that the students working in small

groups are able to effectively assess their own performance without the input of the teacher. In fact, she has had considerable success in turning the entire activity over to the students. She begins by teaching one of the students how to operate the video camera. That student is then responsible for videotaping and for teaching the next student how to operate the camera. Thus each student in the class gets a turn at videotaping others and at teaching another student how to use the camera.

From start to finish, the students can function independently of the teacher in producing an end-product that can be shown to other students. With the students' permission, the tapes can be shown to the class as a whole. Then the whole class participates in giving feedback, focusing on strengths as well as weaknesses. The teacher can again be a guide with such questions as:

"How could she have said that better?
"What other information could she have given the interviewer?"
"Why was that a good answer?"

In this process, students usually find it easier to identify their weaknesses than their strengths. Since talking about one's strong points is so important in a job interview, Beth Upton does an activity to help students become more aware of their strengths. The students themselves take turns telling each other what they like or most admire in each other. For students from some cultures, it is almost taboo to talk about one's strengths. However, on a job interview in the United States it is absolutely essential to be able to state one's qualifications in positive terms. According to Ms. Upton, it is easier for these students to say "People tell me that I am very reliable," rather than stating it directly. Students who have a difficult time recognizing their own strengths find this kind of feedback very supportive and empowering.

With a combination of strategies, it is hoped that ESL students will leave their classes with a heightened sense of their own self-worth as well as with the self- assessment tools so necessary for coping in a new and complex society. The cultures and skill levels of the students as well as the learning environment may influence which strategies are most appropriate.

Bilingual/Bicultural Language Programs

Some of the agencies that are part of the Empowering Learners Project serve people of the same language and cultural background and are thus able to offer a bilingual/bicultural curriculum to their students. One of the advantages of this situation is that the students' prior knowledge can readily be tapped as a basis for new learning. This is consistent with one current definition of learning as the process of linking old knowledge with new knowledge.

In relation to critical thinking, some dominant themes have emerged from the bilingual programs:

1. Critical thinking will occur in a students' first language.
2. Time must be allowed for students to process ideas in their own language first.
3. A bilingual approach can be used to teach such difficult concepts as learning how to learn, even with students at lower levels.

CLUES (Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicio) is one of the agencies which offers a learner-centered bilingual curriculum. The use of the bilingual curriculum is based on the philosophy that second language literacy is more successful when the student's first language is used as a basis for the development of English language skills. This strategy empowers learners by building self-esteem and enabling them to deal more effectively with everyday problems in their communities.

The goal at CLUES is not only to retain the native language and culture of the students but also to use the students' personal experiences in their own culture as a jumping off point for learning English. A discussion that originates in the students' native language based on the students' own experiences is more motivating than one in the target language since the students are able to function as adults and to use their critical thinking skills without being hampered by the language. When the motivation is high, the discussion is transposed into English. Subsequent language activities are based on this initial learner-centered discussion. The students use their own words to generate stories in English based on personal interests, needs, or experiences. In the beginning stages, the teacher will record the students' words on the blackboard. Seeing their own words and then reading their own stories has been found to be a powerful motivator in learning a second language.

Similarly, bilingual staff members at Lao Family Community tap into their students' first language. A traditional Lao approach used by Kou Lee, a teacher with Lao Family Community, follows these steps:

1. Start with a topic, issue, story, etc.
2. Conduct an oral discussion with the class in Hmong.
3. Conduct a discussion on the same topic in English only.
4. Do a written exercise on the topic in Hmong.
5. Do a written exercise on the topic in English.

This format is also the basis for spontaneous lessons by Joua Moua. For example, a student might bring a note to class from her child's school nurse. Ms. Moua then uses the note to teach vocabulary in English and Hmong. She follows the oral exercise with written practice, such as writing a note back to the nurse.

Since most of Lao Family's students share the same native language, Tou Sue Lee is able to discuss many of these cultural differences with his students in their native language. He helps them see that different cultures have different ways of looking at the same issue. This kind of discussion challenges many of the students' long-held cultural biases and stimulates students to think critically about the assumptions on which they operate. According to Mr. Lee, the bilingual curriculum at Lao Family is especially helpful to Hmong women, most of whom have never gone to school before and who are illiterate in their own language. Cross cultural comparisons are also an element of the lesson design in CLUES' bilingual curriculum. Additionally, the bilingual approach can be used for language experiences that celebrate or document students' histories and culture. All agencies use the language experience approach in their teaching. Some students at Lao Family Community are even using computers to record folk tales and family histories.

Strategies for learning how to learn are incorporated into the CLUES curriculum. These strategies are not taught separately but rather are integrated into the course content. For example, specific learning skills such as summarizing, questioning, and using imagery are a part of each lesson. By making these skills a conscious part of the learning process, and by identifying them (in English and Spanish), CLUES students also learn strategies they can transfer to learning outside of their classes.

Literacy in other services

Agencies which provide more than literacy services to their clients are in a unique position to integrate literacy skills in the context of their other services. For example, the bilingual child care specialist at Lao Family Community will often tell clients, "Let's speak English," as she works with them on issues related to their children. This not only encourages clients to learn the language related to issues in their daily life, but also underscores the message that English literacy is important.

Community Resources

I try to speak a lot with people on the bus. . . In the beginning it's not easy but when people hear your accent, they say, "Oh, where do you come from?" It's a very small discussion, but you try to speak and if you practice, you will become better. Last year when I came here I didn't try to speak and my English didn't progress very well.

S. R., France

One of the goals of the agencies involved in the Empowering Learners Project is to produce students who will continue to make progress after they leave the classroom, and who will become productive members of society. However, some ESL students are fearful of moving out into the community and testing their newly acquired English skills. In order to enable these students to become independent of their teachers and tutors, they should be encouraged to tap into community resources available to them at little or no cost. In addition to the more obvious resources such as libraries and museums, students should be encouraged to enroll in inexpensive community education classes or to join a recreational volleyball or softball team at their local schools or parks.

Frequently, upon finishing their classes, ESL students get locked into jobs where there is little opportunity to use English. Typically, they speak their native language with family and friends and have few, if any, American friends with whom they speak English. Many of the students interviewed for this project said that they relied heavily on TV for English practice outside the classroom. Taking community education classes which interest them (eg. parenting, cooking, exercise, ceramics, computers, car repair, etc.) or joining a recreational sports team provides students with an opportunity to not only use their English but also to possibly make some new friends with whom they can continue to speak English. These students will feel empowered as they learn how to take advantage of the many opportunities available to them to continue their learning beyond the classroom.

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